

Walls and Other Boundaries

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

The purpose of creative nonfiction is to reflect on the lessons of experience and to develop empathy. I write creative nonfiction first and foremost, for myself, to slow down and analyze how my childhood experiences continue to affect my present relationships and behavior. Knowing I can reach out to readers and empathize with the traumas they endure, I want to publish my stories to give others hope and communion. As a child, I suffered physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual abuse; grieved my parents' divorce; and dealt with early onset childhood depression—all of which I detail in these three essays. These issues were either caused or exacerbated by several of my family members' disrespect of my bodily autonomy and emotional boundaries. I set out writing these essays to stress the importance of teaching young children boundaries. While that is certainly still important, I've found that adults must also be taught to respect children's boundaries. I also hope that survivors of abuse and trauma are inspired to rebuild their lives for a more loving future.

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Process Analysis

My closest friends have told me I'm sometimes too guarded. This comes as a shock considering how open I am with them compared to others. Frequently, I wonder if I'm too trusting and if I should send in reinforcements to protect the walls around my heart. As will be evident in the following essays, certain events in my childhood have led me to construct barriers between myself and others. Because of early infringements on my personal space, I tend to shy away from most physical affection. Due to other family members' disregard for my private confidence, I'm sometimes hesitant to share my experiences.

The latter is especially why I've struggled to write these essays. The thought of binding my experiences and leaving them on a library shelf for generations of students to read terrifies me. Flimsy paper becomes the stone in which my words are set. Once published, they're absolute, unchanging, final. My words will have consequences and I cannot take them back.

Yet, I want my work to have an impact. My hope is that, by tearing down my excess boundaries and inviting the reader inside, I can share my hope for the future. As Julie Coons writes in her memoir, *This Does Not Leave This House*, "You can't change anything if you don't acknowledge it." (178) By examining my own patterns of behavior which, in a way, enabled cycles of abuse and depression to continue, I can recognize and implement better methods for interacting and coping. By living my recovery story, I gain more concrete lessons to share with others in similar situations than clichés like "Everything happens for a reason," or "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Abuse damages people. It's not a blessing in disguise. It is possible to survive and thrive afterwards, but this takes time and intention.

While writing, I read the recovery stories of several survivors of abuse and trauma. In most accounts, the perpetrators of abuse were either the parents or significant other of the

survivor, arguably two of the closest types of relationships one can have. It makes sense, then, to react to this sort of trauma by shutting everyone out. The thought process is, "You can't get hurt if you don't get close."

Before I wrote these essays, I knew I tended to be aloof. Yet, I never realized why. Jim Lucey, in his book *In My Room*, notes "It is helpful to recognize the potential of our first experiences to influence the arc of our lives, and to understand the experiences and losses that have shaped us from the start." (181) Early in life, I suffered at the hands of my father and my uncle, whom I regarded as another brother. Though I don't consider it abuse, the lack of support and understanding from my mother and grandmother with regards to my mental illness also had an adverse effect.

The refrain of Julie Coons' family was, "This does not leave this house." My family's seemed to be "This did not happen." My father refused to believe my uncle molested me. He also denies ever beating me as a kid. My mother's denial is subtler. For example, when my brother attempted suicide last year, she and my step-dad went shopping, movie-going, and out to eat like nothing had happened.

Too often, I had to join in the act to avoid further conflict. My uncle threatened to break my limbs if I told anyone he sexually assaulted me. I lived in constant fear of being hit by my dad, so for years I couldn't stand up to his abuse. At the time of my brother's suicide attempt, I was also struggling with ideation. Our mother would react with anger any time I had an anxiety attack or my brother tried to explain his depression to her, as though it were a personal attack on her. I was in no position to handle any more stress. So, instead of pushing my family to speak about the event, I played along.

Describing the circumstances of my early life and how it affects my logic and behavior to readers who may not share my experiences has been challenging. The threat of a beating and constant verbal abuse were simply a part of daily life. No one wants to read about someone's morning commute or what they ate for breakfast. My family's refusal to discuss these things normalized them so much, I overlooked them until recent years. Until I was a teen, I saw no serious problem with the names Dad called me when he was angry or the threats he made. I'd grown up with his temper, so his words lacked a punch. Physical abuse was more of a threat, but even that was justified as discipline instead of abuse.

So much more creeps into the essays, like the whiskey bottles and beer cans that litter the first two essays. The most striking discovery I made while revising the first essay was how poorly I was treated when reporting sexual assault. I've always hated the way Dad handled the situation and for a while I was resentful of the justice system for not doing more to protect me from potential future assault. Looking back now, I feel mocked by "Fireman Sam." He seemed to treat me as a stupid little kid who was probably making the whole story up. As I grew up, I learned more about the victim blaming and dismissal of older sexual assault victims. That scene with Sam shows that rape culture affects even seven-year-olds.

Juggling perspectives was a challenge with each essay. My past-self dominates most of the essays, which, according to my advisor and friends who have proofread them, makes my story difficult to read because of the heavy subject matter. While revising, I was constantly torn between fully immersing the reader in the experience of a child struggling in my family or providing guidance through the narrative which I wish I'd had at the time. I have inserted minimal instances of my perspective now, but much of the power of the essays, especially the first, still comes from the experience of my child self's point of view.

Characterization proved to be another challenge. While reading Julie Coons' memoir, I found myself doubting her experiences, even though I knew what it was like to live with an abuser. The characterization of her mother contributed the most to my disbelief. "I never once knew what it felt like to have a mother who unconditionally loved me, was on my side, or had my back." (143) Not once does the narrator's mother do something good for her. While I understand it's easier to use hate to distance one's self from an abuser, there are more complex emotions involved.

I did my best to avoid demonizing my family members. It's my belief that no one is completely evil. Dad had his good moments, like playing cards with me or teaching me how to fix cars. AJ taught me to make pizza and never touched me again. Mom and Grandma Madden occasionally reached out to me. It's the little moments that add humanity to a story and its characters.

Likewise, I made sure to portray myself as a human. I showed the bratty seven-year-old who threw a cat in the gold fish pond and threw a fit over which pajamas I wanted to wear. As a conflicted teen, I'm seen helping Dad throw my half-sister out of the house. Finally, in the third essay, the reader is invited to observe my struggles as an adult to understand and set boundaries. I'm no perfect protagonist, but admitting my faults gives my story much more credibility.

This project has been another step towards recovery. My advisor, Professor Jill Christman, has given me the gift of an outsider's perspective of these essays. Her perspective has drawn my attention to many things which I normalized, such as the nights I spent sleeping on the floor after my parents' divorce or my parents' failure to address problems while I was growing up. With this new understanding, I am learning to develop healthier boundaries and future successful relationships.

Works Cited

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Playing Mamma

“Grandma?” I opened my eyes and stared at the slanted ceiling above my head. *Where is she?* I crawled out of bed and ran downstairs. “Grandma!”

“Out here, Catie,” she called from outside as she fed the cats. Among them was Foxy Lady, a grey, long-haired devil-cat. I fed her from my hand and attempted to pick her up by her tail. She scratched me, so I got a better grip on her and tossed her into the goldfish pond.

Grandma Masterson promptly scolded me before moving on to the chicken coop.

After feeding the cats and chickens and harvesting the eggs, Grandma and I went inside for breakfast. As she rinsed the eggs under the kitchen faucet, I heard my thirteen-year-old uncle coming downstairs. Once we finished breakfast, Uncle AJ and I went outside to play with his Australian Shephard, Lauren, and give my dad’s horse, GoBoy, apples from Grandpa’s tree. Then we swam in the newly dug and filled lake.

Later in the evening, Mom and Dad brought my little brother and baby sister to pick me up. It had been a long day of playing in the sun. Despite my younger siblings’ banter in the backseat, it was surprisingly easy to sleep through the 30-minute drive home. It was just another normal seven-year-old’s visit to their grandparents’ house.

“All right, Squirrel, I need you to come stand out here and hand me tools when I need ‘em.”

“Okay, Dad.” I was fulfilling my role as Daddy’s little helper. He and I would fix things around the house while Mom worked at the gas station or the nursing home. A while back, he tarred the roof of the trailer while I held the ladder. Together, we also re-did the front porch, painted the trailer, and re-ran the electrical wiring in the house through PVC pipes. Before bed,

we'd watch *Red Green* and repeat the motto, "If women don't find you handsome, they should at least find you handy."

Dad was never very sociable. He hated crowds and would sooner send one of us kids into the station to pay for gas or groceries before he'd leave the truck. He might talk to a couple of our neighbors, but for the most part, he harbored a certain animosity toward people. This only increased when we moved to Boonville. Our dinky little trailer was guarded like a fortress. Among Dad's numerous home "repairs" was a chain-link fence around the driveway with a padlocked swing gate at the entrance. My siblings and I were never allowed outside this area to play. Not only did he attach a deadbolt to the front door, but he also added sliding locks to the interior doors. For some reason, Dad even padlocked our toy box, a homemade plywood case about 4 feet high, 3 feet wide, and five feet long. Not one window was left exposed for a potential passerby to peek in. Dad covered the windows with blankets, then upgraded to black spray-paint, then to plywood, then to black spray-painted plywood.

Granted, Julian's Trailer Park wasn't the safest neighborhood. Any trailer could be a ticking time bomb with all the meth labs around us, but all living things need sunlight. Dad, of all people, should have known that after growing up in Dubois County, living and working on a farm and driving trucks. Dad had independence. Dad had the outdoors. My siblings and I had to state where we were going every time we needed to use the bathroom in a 30-foot-long sweatbox called a trailer.

As Daddy's little helper, I saw the sun more than my siblings, usually while working on trucks or the house. I'd rather have been working on the stack of homework piled on the kitchen table than counting all the different names Dad called me when I didn't fetch a tool fast enough. After a while, I learned to tune him out.

One day, Dad and I were out working on his truck. I gave him whatever he needed, then went to find pretty rocks hidden in the gravel driveway. I loved the sunlight glistened and bounced off the facets of quartz and the chalky feeling of limestone on my hands. There was a spot by the house, near a piece of dented underpinning, where I hid all the quartz I could find, along with one or two blue-striped stones I'd nicknamed "Indian Stones." Though it was not guarded by walls and padlocks, no one ever bothered my hoard. I hadn't learned how to build barricades like Dad yet. There was no need to.

"Hey, stranger!" Our neighbor, Butch, crossed the street. Dad rolled out from under the truck to greet him. I continued my search for rocks while the two sat on the tailgate and gabbed. "Did you hear about the guy they arrested that raped that poor girl in Jasper?" For whatever reason, this and only this part of their conversation stood out to me, particularly the word, "rape." *What did that word mean?* I decided to ask Grandma Madden the next time I saw her.

Dad grumbled something about how people like that ought to be hanged or perhaps I heard something more graphic. I lost interest and returned to my quest for jewels to add to my hoard. The subject remained forgotten for the next several weeks.

"Hey, Cat, d'you wanna play a game?" Uncle AJ and I had been staring blankly at Grandma Masterson's soap operas for the better part of an hour while she prepared dinner. She always left her favorite shows on and listened through the window between the den and the kitchen as she rinsed dishes. "Let's play house. I'll be the daddy and you be the mommy." I wasn't thrilled with the idea, but make-believe sounded better than more TV. I moved behind the sectional and Grandma's ugly green arm chair to where Aunt Tammy's old play dishes were strung out. I picked up a pot and spoon and mimicked Grandma cooking.

AJ turned Grandma's chair to face me and sat. "Pull down your pants."

"Hmm?"

"Do it." AJ unzipped the front of his jeans and took out his... his... Well, it's not that hard to figure out.

"Grandma, AJ's doing something gross!" I hollered over the blaring TV. I didn't understand what was happening as something utterly detestable. In my seven-year-old mind, this was the equivalent of my brother wiping his boogers on the arm of the couch.

"AJ, stop it." She didn't even look up. It was up to me to defend myself, but how? I reluctantly obeyed. He didn't stop. There was contact. It didn't go all the way in, but there was contact nonetheless.

"Dinner!" Grandma turned quickly from the sink to set the table. She saw nothing. The two of us zipped and washed up, then sat at the table as though nothing ever happened.

A similar situation occurred at the garage sometime later. Through the darkness, I could barely see Grandpa Masterson's whiskey bottles scattered across his work tables. I remember AJ leaned up against Grandpa's truck, unzipping his pants again. Everything else is blurry until afterwards. As we left the garage to go in the house, AJ threatened, "If you tell anyone about this, I'll break your legs." Used to empty threats from my Dad and siblings as I was, I tried using humor as a defense.

"Then I'll just crawl."

"Then I'll break your arms too," AJ growled.

"Then I'll roll," I laughed as I skipped across the driveway.

Sometimes, I get the feeling there was a third incident, but it's been blocked forever from my conscious memory. Maybe I walled it off because the event was too much for my seven-year-old brain to handle or maybe these incidents were simply becoming commonplace. Because my memory of the second and potential third incidents is so fuzzy, I often question if they ever happened. For years afterwards, these events seemed more like a nightmare than anything that could happen in real life. However, the first account of sexual assault was so vivid and ingrained in my memory that I would replay it frequently as a reminder to myself that this was real; this did happen.

"Grandma, do you hear that fummer?" I turned my head on the pillow to face Grandma Madden. It had stormed all night. Usually, rain put me to sleep, but that night, I was haunted by the feeling that I'd forgotten something important.

"Yeah, Red Head, I hear it."

"Grandma?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"Can we stay up and talk?"

"Sure, Catie." She turned on the bedside lamp. While lightning flashed outside, we talked about school, Mom and Dad, my siblings, and so on. I recalled how my half-siblings had walked in on me while I was dressing and I hid naked behind a giant stuffed panda. Then, I told her about the day we were imitating the movie *Big Mamma*.

The opening scene showed Big Mamma going through her morning routine and sitting on the commode. Seven-year-old me had no shame if it meant playing the part accurately. I stripped down my pants. My older half-siblings ran and told Dad. He called me into the living

room and bent me over his knee. I laid there, braced for the sting of his belt. Instead, he turned to Mom, "Go get the video camera." My pants came down, again. I stared down at the floor, crying. Somehow, this was worse than a beating. Being exposed involuntarily is different than play-acting. I didn't dare look up and show my face to the camera or see if the red light was on.

Why my parents reacted this way, I still don't know. They both seemed to think it was funny when my two younger siblings would streak through the house and out into the yard. Age had nothing to do with it. My siblings were barely even scolded, let alone spanked or videotaped. My lack of understanding at the time only added to the pain of being "disciplined."

Grandma listened quietly while I rambled on. Finally, something triggered my ever-so-important question.

"Grandma, what's 'rape'?"

"Where did you hear that word?"

"Dad and Butch were talking about it."

She paused for a moment, thinking of how to explain this to a seven-year-old. "It's when a guy sticks his pee-pee into another girl's pee-pee when she doesn't want it."

"Yuck! What girl would even want that?" I wondered. My mind darted back to AJ. I told Grandma about the first and second times AJ "raped" me as well as what I was able to recall of the third occasion. "I think we were at the lake, or maybe it was in the garage again... I'm not sure." I was beginning to wonder if I'd dreamt up the third time.

I don't remember Grandma's response. It was early in the morning before we went to sleep. A day or two later, the two of us made a trip down to the Boonville Police Station.

Fireman Sam, who I recognized from various school assemblies such as the “It’s My Body” presentation at Loge Elementary, sat waiting at a table under the fluorescent lights in the basement. There was a chair pulled out for me across from him, but nothing else in the room. Grandma walked down the steps with me and closed the door. She waited there while Fireman Sam and I talked.

We went through the basic questions first, like *What is your name? What is your address?* “This here’s a voice recorder,” Sam said, gesturing to a tiny device next to his notepad on the table. He seemed more serious than he did at school. He asked if it was ok to use, to which I agreed. “Now, tell me exactly what you told your grandma.”

Grandma hadn’t been clear about why we were here, so I told him everything I could remember about our conversation that one night, including the incident with the video camera. It was a while before I got to the part with AJ.

“How old is your uncle?” Sam asked.

“Thirteen.”

“Where does he live?”

“Santa Claus.”

“He lives at the North Pole?” Sam raised an eyebrow.

“No! It’s... it’s a place... in Indiana.” I felt embarrassed and frustrated. I second-guessed myself. *What kind of name is Santa Claus for a town?*

Sam asked me to continue with the story. “He stuck his... his...” I was suddenly aware that pee-pee and pee-tail weren’t the correct terms. Was rectum the right word? No. What then?

“His worm?” Sam offered.

"Yeah... He stuck it in mine." I suddenly felt disgusted.

The rest of the interview is a blur until the end. "Who told you what rape is?" Sam asked.

I turned to the door where Grandma stood. "Grandma."

"What, baby?" she asked.

"No, Grandma."

"What?" she repeated.

Impatient, Sam picked up his papers and turned off the voice recorder. That was it for the day.

Maybe a week or so later, I visited the police station again. My parents brought me this time. At the top of the stairs, Dad turned to me and said, "Now Caitlin, I want you to tell them the truth." He probably wanted me to say that AJ had not molested me but couldn't order that with an officer standing behind him.

"I will," I said as I stepped down the stairs alone. I still didn't understand why we were back at the police station. Sam waited at the same table with his voice recorder. My story was exactly the same, except this time I mentioned that Mom said she'd turned the camera off during the whole Big Mamma incident.

"That's all?" Sam looked surprised. Looking back, I think he expected something to change about my testimony against AJ.

"Yep, pretty much," I answered.

"The judge called it molest. The kids aren't allowed to stay here alone anymore." Mom, Dad, and Grandma Masterson stood talking in the front of the driveway. Mom shooed me away when she noticed me eavesdropping.

"Meow." Foxy Lady pawed at my shoelaces. Placing one arm under her back feet and the other hand under her front paws, I picked the cat up and carried her to the air conditioning unit beside the house. It was the first time she ever let me hold her.

I scratched Foxy Lady's ears and looked over to Dad. His face was red and swollen in anger. For a moment, I thought I saw him glare in my direction. My focus dropped back to the cat on my lap.

"Catie," Grandma beckoned me. Foxy Lady stepped off onto the A/C as I rose to meet her. "Catie, you have a very good heart. A lot of things change in this world, but don't ever let anything change that."

"I won't," I assured her. *What could she have meant?*

"We'd better be gettin' home," Dad interrupted.

I never thought this could happen to me, I thought as I lay on the floor of Grandma Madden's trailer. Mom and Dad divorced. I lived with my mom, Grandma Madden, and my two younger siblings. Dad lived alone, except for every other weekend when my siblings and I came to visit.

Though it meant sleeping on the floor and fending off the fleas from her terrier, Pete, at Grandma Madden's, I had all the sunshine I wanted. The fence around the yard and the trailers on either side of us still formed a border, but my siblings and I had enough room to play. We rode bikes in the long muddy driveway, climbed trees, set up a tent, caught stray animals, ate

honeysuckles, attempted to dig a hole to China, buried treasure, played basketball with the neighbor kids, visited the Hispanic couple next door, and made friends.

At times, Dad's house was even darker than before. Without Mom's paycheck, he sometimes couldn't pay the electric bill. Then, the only light in the trailer came from the sunlight creeping in through the cracks in the silicone around the windows. We wouldn't do much at Dad's, except listen to him curse the world and my mother and occasionally rant about how Grandma Madden had accused his little brother of being a child molester. He blamed Grandma more than me for the divorce, so our bond wasn't completely severed. We still went through the whole "Gimme some sugar" routine as before, where upon demand, I would go sit on Dad's lap and kiss his cheek. Then, he'd scratch my face with his whiskers, which was kind of painful. Though I didn't enjoy the routine, I still felt obligated to participate.

Dad often demanded more physical touch than the occasional peck on the cheek. As Daddy's little helper, I had to rub baby oil on his swollen, cracked feet, massage his back for hours on end while my younger siblings played in the other room, shave his back until my hands felt numb from the vibration of the clippers, and pluck other stubborn hairs with tweezers until my fingers cramped.

In time, I grew resentful of my father. Setting boundaries did no good. I hated the way he pinned me down with just the weight of his arm when he wanted to cuddle in bed. "It's too cold to sleep in the living room floor," he'd complain. Never mind that my little brother had only a blanket and the couch.

Most touch from Dad seemed benign at the time. Occasionally, though, he could be violent. One day when I was about fifteen years old, we were playing cards at the kitchen table. My little brother and sister were watching TV in the living room. Dad called me over for the

routine and I obeyed. Despite having sliced halfway into one of his fingers during an incident at the factory, he then proceeded to pinch my ribs. "Stop, that hurts!" I snapped at him, but he kept trying to tickle me.

Instinctively, I grabbed both his hands in an attempt to escape. The next thing I knew, I was lying flat on my back with a sharp pain in my head from where I'd hit the kitchen stove. Dad sat glaring down at me, his hand still raised to smack me again. He would have too, if my younger siblings hadn't rushed in to see what happened.

By the time Mom picked us up Sunday, I had pushed the incident out of my mind. I wonder if it was too much for my brain to process at the time. I think I overheard one of my siblings tell our mother about it, which triggered the memory again. I walked out of the house crying.

Though I knew for certain my dad's behavior wasn't normal for a parent, I didn't bother reporting the incident. I worried what Dad might do to me if I did. I wouldn't have to wait too much longer for freedom anyway. Dad stopped picking us up for visitation within the next year. Before then, I helped to undo all the work we'd ever done on the trailer.

Maybe Dad had reached peak paranoia of his neighbors or maybe he just couldn't make the rent. Either way, he tore down the trailer and moved in with AJ, who was then about twenty-one years old. My arms and face itched as my siblings and I tore down the last of the insulation and paneling from the walls and hauled it out to the truck bed. Dad drove us up to Santa Claus to AJ's house where we burned the splintery pile. I remember watching the green paint peel off the front door as the flames swallowed it whole. When the fire subsided, all that remained was the

tarnished knob. I thought about taking it home once it cooled as a sort of souvenir but thought that might be like taking a cursed object home.

At the time, I blamed the trailer for my Dad's behavior. Who wouldn't be resentful after almost a decade of life in that dump? I hoped he would be happier staying with AJ in Santa Claus for a while. He was back in the countryside with the sunshine and large cornfields and forests separating him from AJ's neighbors. I'd overlooked the fact that several depressing aspects of the trailer had been Dad's handiwork. I refused to touch the doorknob, when maybe I should have refused contact with him.

"Cate, come in here and say 'hi' to your grandma!" Dad hollered from the living room.

"She said 'hi' to me when I walked through the door," Grandma Masterson sassed.

Tell him, Grandma, I thought as I prepared the pizza for dinner. *In a couple years... just a couple more years...* I counted down to the day my sentence ended and I could spend my time as I pleased. I didn't know that in six months, Dad would stop picking me and my siblings up for the weekends. That night though, AJ was teaching me how to make pizza.

AJ and I didn't normally talk much during these visits. He drank more while we were there, or so Dad claimed. Neither of us mentioned the past. *Does he even know I remember?* I stared as he showed me how to mix the dough, lost in thought. *How is it that I can have a better relationship with the man who molested me than with my own father?*

"Cate, could you get your grandma a refill?"

Oh my god, he's the neediest man I've ever met! I screamed inside my head. "Coming!" I called into the living room. After tending to Grandma, I returned to the kitchen and my thoughts. The air was calmer there, or maybe just quieter.

Did I make up the whole story as some way of understanding the conversation between Dad and Butch? If it did happen, and I'm pretty sure it did, how many times did he touch me? How did that third time go? Is this why Mom and Dad divorced? Did I cause this? Is it bad that I think about these things almost a decade later? I think I've forgiven AJ, although I'm not entirely sure what forgiveness is. How do I forgive Dad? Will Dad and I ever speak about it? Should we? A part of me still wanted to be vulnerable with my family. I knew by then it wasn't healthy to completely wall myself off, but how could I open up to people who had hurt me so much?

The mind chatter lasted all through dinner and far into the night. Finally, as I lay down in the bed in my uncle's spare room, I took a moment to breathe, close my eyes, and try to rest.

The Deep End

“Catie, take your brother and sister to the bedroom. Don’t come out until I tell you to,”

Grandma watched the living room door anxiously. Dad was almost there to pick us up.

Grandma suggested we play a little trick on him. She’d convince him to let us stay with her longer so that he could work more on his pickup truck. Then, when Mom’s shift ended, and she came to meet us, we’d never have to go home to Dad’s trailer again. Wouldn’t he be surprised! I ran with my siblings to the back of Grandma’s trailer. Matt hid in the closet. I shut the door and hid under the covers with Hallie.

It took everything I had to control my squirmy little eight-year-old body. I was so excited. I poked my head out from under Grandma’s comforter to listen. Grandma gave him the pitch. He bought it. There was the door slam and the sound of his whiny truck engine. I listened for the crunch of gravel as Dad pulled out of the drive, then rushed with my siblings to the living room to celebrate our successful prank.

This was the day that Mom left Dad.

That summer my mother sent me and my brother to day camp at Scales Lake. Despite a sunburn that blistered my face so bad my skin peeled like crab meat, poison ivy rashes in the few places the sun didn’t scorch, and almost drowning in the lake, it was one of the most fun weeks of my childhood. Matt and I enjoyed catching minnows in Styrofoam cups, scouting through cattails for interesting bugs, and burying mounds of mussel shells on the man-made beach. Life fascinated us both. Our newfound freedom made life sweeter than it had ever been in the confines of Dad’s boarded up, run-down trailer. This joy only lasted so long. That was the summer I almost drowned.

I stepped up to the lake's shallow edge, dressed in a pair of bright orange shorts, t-shirt, sunglasses, and pink floppy sunhat to shield my fair, sunscreen-soaked skin. After watching me pout alone at a picnic table because dry sand is the most boring thing in the world, the counsellors finally caved and let me swim. I ran back to the picnic table and threw down the stupid hat and glasses, then rushed into the water, nearly tripping on the wet, slimy lake bottom. As I ventured out, bluegill darted around my legs. I was determined to learn to swim like them. But first, I had to master the back float, which I practiced a safe distance from the shore for the life guards to watch.

Dad wasn't pleased when he found out Mom was leaving him. The prank didn't work as well as hoped since my siblings and I eventually had to return. However, Dad didn't suspect us of anything. So, he elected the eldest and most literate of us three, me, to write a letter to Mom begging her to stay with him. Dad complained that he wouldn't be able to care for the three of us or afford daycare without her. I made sure to mention this in the letter along with my own concerns.

Dad had a nasty, violent temper. The tiniest offense could light his short fuse. Once when I was a toddler, I was throwing a fit, as toddlers do, about which pajamas I wanted to wear. Dad became so impatient that he picked me up and threw me onto my bed. I fell so hard, I bit into my tongue and bled. Another time, I asked Mom for the fourth time if the brownies she had made were cool enough to eat yet. Dad opened the fridge, grabbed my hand, and held it onto the searing hot brownies. I cried and begged him to stop, but he didn't listen until Mom yelled at him.

I couldn't bear the thought of having to live with Dad without someone to protect me from his outbursts. When I gave Mom the letter, she assured me that she had always intended to take the three of us with her. I was relieved and, once again, excited to escape.

Despite our love-hate relationship, I enjoyed the sun's warm, high noon shine on my pale, white skin. There's something like a cat in me, though I don't know of any that like water, that loves to lie in the sun and nap.

Everyone struggled to stay afloat during the first few months of the divorce. My mother worked two jobs to support three children on her own. My father was faced with the decision to look at himself critically after his third divorce or drink away the pain with money he didn't have. My baby sister, a three-year-old Daddy's girl, spent her days alone with Grandma while Mom worked and my brother and I had fun at camp. My brother, who had earned the nickname little Bart because of his close semblance to our father, seemed to struggle with some resentment against our mother for separating us from Dad. To be honest though, I don't know my siblings' exact feelings about the divorce. I can only remember the overwhelming sense of guilt I felt, which I hid from everyone.

That guilt pounded me like the water in the wave pool at Holiday World. I took my siblings to hide in Grandma's bedroom. I was supposed to make Mom stay. This was my fault.

The divorce became final on November 10th, Marine Corps Birthday. For the four of us, this became a second Independence Day. Dad came by with a truckload of the rest of our things: toys, knick-knacks, blankets, Christmas decorations, clothes, and cooking utensils. Some things were missing, possibly burned. Dad did the same after his third wife, Martha, tried to leave him.

He packed up her clothes from the storage shed and burned them at his brother's farm after Martha escaped to her parents' house. It wouldn't surprise me if he had burned some of Mom's possessions, like the family tree she had been constructing.

It didn't matter. There was hardly room in Grandma's little trailer for the five of us, let alone all our stuff. Matt barely fit on the little loveseat he slept on in the living room. Mom, Grandma, and baby Hallie slept together in Grandma's bed. Meanwhile, I slept on the floor of Grandma's spare room which was slightly bigger than a cell at Alcatraz. Grandma eventually moved to the income-based apartments across town and left us with her trailer. It freed up a little room for Mom and Hallie to sleep, but not much more.

One night, like many others, I struggled to sleep on the floor of the tiny spare bedroom. My cheeks burned from crying into the rough, blue carpet. I had always been "the good child" or "Daddy's Little Helper." Aside from book smarts, my character seemed to be the only aspect of my personality either of my parents cared about. By helping Mom and my siblings escape, I hadn't been an obedient daughter, as far as Dad was concerned. "Honor thy father and mother," my mind chanted. There was no way I could please them both. I tossed and turned under the scratchy throw blanket. I wished desperately for forgiveness and comfort, but I was too ashamed to ask for it. Instead, I asked to sleep in Mom's bed. I pretended to sleep for the first hour, but my rapid, shallow breathing gave me away. I was so upset, she had to call Dad in the middle of the night to pick me up.

I tried to redeem myself by visiting Dad as much as possible. After all, he was my father and I wanted to be close. During the beginning stages of the divorce, he tried to convince me and my siblings to spend as much time as possible with him, if not stay and live there. He'd

always say, "Stay with me tonight, and tomorrow we'll grab the poles from the shed and go up to Tipsaw." I'd wake the next morning to see dust floating in the sunbeams filtering through the cracks in the plywood Dad placed over the windows. He'd sleep until noon sometimes, then complain it was too hot to go fishing. "We'll go tomorrow." After so long, trapped inside his trailer beside him while he slept on the couch in front of the TV, forced to scratch, shave and pluck the hair from his back, rub baby lotion on his swollen, smelly feet, and run to the kitchen to fetch him another beer, I realized Dad never intended to keep his promise.

Some years later, Dad and I were arguing about something, the topic I don't remember, and he asked, "Have I ever lied to you?"

"Yes," I replied, "you promised we'd go fishing."

He looked me straight in the eye and said, "I meant about something that mattered."

I shut my eyes and relaxed as the waves gently rocked me halfway to sleep. I was barely aware of the chatter of my fellow campers floating around me. Soon enough, the thunder of water in my ears drowned them out.

As the days after the divorce dragged on, Dad became even more tired and bitter. He'd send me to the kitchen to grab him a beer, drink some, and leave it on the metal fold-up chair next to the couch he slept on during the day. Then we'd be left to watch old westerns while Dad snored. I had to continually rub and scratch his back. Otherwise, he'd wake up and continue griping about how the Internet ruined his relationship with my mother and how she ran off with some guy she met online (yet she moved in with her mother and remained single), or how my older half-siblings didn't want to visit him anymore and they were all brainwashed by their mother, or how the neighbors in the trailer park were all "meth-heads" who always tried to break

into his trucks. I still feared Dad too much to tell him that his never-ending rants were one of the reasons Mom left him.

Instead, I tried one of Dad's own escape mechanisms. Exhausted from his constant complaining, I'd complain equally as much about how tired I was until I was allowed to enter the scorching heat of the back half of his trailer to nap. This worked pretty well for me, so I used it in other settings too. When the screaming of children and frustrated adults at daycare overwhelmed me, I would lie down on one of the cots inside or a plastic bench outside and sleep for a few hours, or at least, pretend to while I ignored the younger children's hollering.

Of course, napping throughout the day allowed me to spend all night staring at the blank paneling wall, thinking about how much trouble I had caused my family, or so I thought. I blamed myself for Mom and Dad's constant fighting and financial problems. It wasn't just guilt keeping me up at night, but hunger pangs too.

I stopped eating at home, partially because I had grown sick of chicken nuggets and PB&J's, but also because I felt like I didn't deserve to eat. It wasn't uncommon for either of my parents to make some comment about how they were the ones working to pay the bills and "feed [my] ass." It didn't matter what I did or didn't do. I didn't deserve anything.

At first, my stomach felt like I'd swallowed a knife and it kept twisting and churning inside me. Random parts of my body would go numb and I'd have terrible headaches and vertigo. To combat this, I slept some more. I didn't dare eat anything voluntarily after two or three days of starvation. I'd be so nauseated, nothing would stay down. If there's one thing I hated more than starving, it was vomiting. I had always been small, but now I could wrap my hands around my waist and have my thumbs and middle fingers touch.

Looking back now, I realize this was a lot to put on a child. I know I was and am not responsible for my dad's temper or my parents' divorce. I know an eight or nine-year-old can't be expected to work for their own food and clothes. I didn't deserve to starve myself or punch my thighs when I thought I'd misbehaved. But since I've picked up that guilt, I don't know how to set it down.

Mom noticed my change in behavior and consulted with Grandma to determine what she should do. One day, while Grandma was visiting, Mom sent my siblings outside to play, while she and Grandma sat me down at the kitchen table. They asked what was bothering me, why wasn't I playing outside, why wasn't I eating? I was cornered between the table and the kitchen window. At the time, it felt so confrontational, I refused to answer honestly. I denied there being anything wrong. I complained I was sick of chicken and sandwiches—not a total lie. I claimed my siblings would spend all their time indoors if they could—bullshit. Mom and Grandma weren't satisfied with my replies, but it was clear I wouldn't confide in them. It would be three more years before I realized I was depressed. By then, I would have a much harder time finding help.

I opened my eyes as my toes snagged a piece of what I hope was freshwater seaweed. Above me, the green water glistened. My frenemy the sun peered through the surface, creating a soothing tie-dye effect. For a moment, I remained there, suspended in the water, listening to the muffled voices of a group of girls next to me. "That's pretty," I thought. "Oh, wait, crap, I'm underwater and I can't swim!"

One November night when I was in seventh grade, Mom was cooking dinner alone. I thought I'd tell her about what I was feeling. The conversation went like this:

"Hey, Mom, I think I'm depressed."

"It's probably just hormones." She didn't even look up from the stove.

I didn't know what else to say, so I left the room. After a while, I felt relieved the conversation didn't go anywhere. A couple days later, Mom set me down at the kitchen table for another talk. She asked why I thought I was depressed. I gave a few excuses, like how my friends in middle school all hated each other, the Excel Class stressed me out, and how weekends with Dad were worsening.

Flashback to a couple weeks before this, one of the worst so far. Dad was in a particularly foul mood. He griped about my mother, my older half-siblings, his neighbors, and the people on the road non-stop. Finally, Sunday afternoon, Dad lay down for a nap on the couch. Matt, Hallie, and I stretched out on the floor in front of the TV, while our dog curled up in a corner.

My siblings and I talked, but as I remember, Lady was quiet the entire time. Dad rolled over and yelled at her to shut up multiple times. At one point, he pulled out his pocket-knife and threw it. It opened in mid-air, bounced off the thin paneling wall, and landed next to Lady. I had been across the room near the kitchen, but now found myself almost in reach of the dog and knife.

Dad made it there first. He grabbed the dog's neck and held the knife to her throat. He didn't hurt her, but we were all too eager to run to Mom's van when we heard the muffler rattle at six.

I told Mom this story and begged her not to do anything, but I could already sense trouble rising like floodwater. As much as I hated weekend visitation, I feared what Dad might think if we all agreed to stop going. *Would he show up at the house and yell at me? Hit me? Or worse, would he threaten suicide like he did when my mother first left him?* Mom didn't listen. She didn't let us visit Dad that weekend. Attorneys were hired and the conflict escalated to the point where Mom asked Dad to sign his rights away in exchange for forgiveness of back child support. He refused and pushed for week-on, week-off visitation. Attorney fees increased and Dad lost his job because of court dates.

Dad called to talk to the three of us kids. By the time it was my turn to hold the phone, I was sobbing. Dad told me he never threw the knife at the dog, that he would never hurt her, that he would never... Anger now mixed with shame, but it all clumped together like phlegm in my throat. Dad kept telling me I remembered it all wrong and asked me to talk to him first if I ever had a problem. We said good-bye and hung up the phone.

When it came down to it, I didn't have the courage to stand up in court and tell Judge Aylsworth I didn't want to visit anymore. Nothing changed except, now that the conflict had stretched past Christmas, for years to come, Dad would passively blame be for ruining the holidays. Not only that, but since Dad lost his job, he couldn't pay the utility bills. For at least a year, we cooked ramen on a woodstove, burned trash for heat, showered at Scales Lake, and watched a tiny black and white TV hooked up to a car battery.

I had reached out for help with my depression and managed to take everyone down with me. That's when I decided it only caused more trouble to speak up. It would be better off for everyone if I suffered in silence.

Nine years later, I realize I did not single-handedly ruin Christmas. Dad was the one who acted violently. Mom didn't listen when I asked her not to do anything. And my siblings backed up my story.

It was clear the lifeguards weren't paying any attention. However, the blond-haired girl whose shoulder my fingers were digging into, Katie, understood. "Guys, she can't swim." Her friends grabbed my arms so I wouldn't drag Katie down with me and they pulled me half-way to shore. From there, I crawled on my knees and collapsed where the water met the sand.

As I grew older and drifted away from my parents and closer to my friends, I could more clearly analyze my parents' behavior as well as my own. My friends are easier on me than I am. They don't make me feel guilty for continuing to struggle with these issues. Instead, they gently assure me that things like the divorce were not my fault.

I never intended to drag anyone down with me. I was drowning in the stress of my parents' divorce. My parents had thrown me into this new home life and now I had to sink or swim. Self-preservation was nearly all I could think about at the time. As an adult, the question still remains, was I wrong to reach out for help? Or was there something the adults in my life, my dad especially, could have done better?

Silence is Safest

"There's nothing to save," I sighed as the flap of the mail slot swung closed. I finally did it. It wasn't as courageous and honorable as confronting him face to face, but I did it. A letter to Dad explaining my new no-contact policy against him began its journey. I took a photograph before mailing it. Nothing major or recent prompted this decision. It was just time to let go.

I e-mailed my hall director to block Dad's number from the front desk. Then, I called the counselling center as a proactive measure. I notified Mom and asked her to drop Great-Grandpa Masterson's pocket knife sheath and belt buckle along with Dad's New Testament (all gifts he had given me with the charge to never lose) on Dad's doorstep, knock, and drive away.

After delivering the letter, I crept back to my dorm room. As I turned a corner in the hall, one of my neighbors met me with a plate of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. "Would you like a cookie?" she offered.

"Sure, thanks," I smiled and took one to my room.

As I sat munching at my desk, the Swiss Army knife in my purse came to mind. I figured it would be safer to hand it off to someone before my mental state tanked. A neighbor took the knife and promised to check on me every now and then. After she left, I packed my bookbag for class the next day and went to bed.

Even though there wasn't much of a relationship to save, I still hurt. I didn't have a dad. The first night after delivering the letter, my mood wasn't terrible. The next couple of days, I fought with myself more. My conscience tormented me with thoughts such as: *Here you are eating homemade cookies, getting free massages at the counselling center, and bathing in essential oils while a letter basically telling your father to 'Fuck off' is being delivered.* I would

combat this with, *You know what? I spent twenty years hating myself and holding onto hurt and being hurt because of that man. So, if I want a cookie, I'm getting a damn cookie!*

Part of me still thought of Dad in human terms, as though he would be heart-broken to receive my letter, but then I'd remember he didn't know the real me. I'd spent the past few years making sure never to need him and to never share important parts of my life with him. For three years, I hid in the broom closet just to be laughed at when I told him I was pagan. There was no relationship to save, because all he did was use me to start fights with my siblings. I wasn't his child; I was his tool.

Within a few days, Dad called me before an afternoon class. I let my phone go to voicemail and refused to listen to his message for several days. I knew he would try to manipulate me into abandoning my no-contact policy. After about a week, my curiosity got the better of me. Dad's message said something to the effect of, "Miss Masterson, this is your father. Call me when you've calmed down."

I specifically chose to mail the letter with my complaints when I was calm and thinking clearly. My friend, Darian, proofread it for me to make sure I wasn't unreasonable. I was sick of being Dad's accomplice when he started fights with my siblings. For instance, when my Dad threw my half-sister out of the house, he called me over to help pack her things. Her "offense" was that she was trans, bisexual, and she refused to give Dad control over her bank account. I agreed to help with the intent of monitoring Dad so he didn't damage or dispose of any of my sister's property. Still, he managed to toss out her Hello Kitty bedsheets before I arrived. We met my sister at the storage units across town and unloaded her things. She offered Dad gas money, but he refused to speak to her. When it was time to leave, I hugged my sister, wished her well, and whispered something about how relieved I was to see her freed from him. I don't think

Dad heard me. He just looked at my sister like she was one of the roaches that infested the storage units, then slid into the driver's seat and slammed the truck door.

After reassuring myself that I had not acted rashly, I deleted the message and went to my next class.

Aside from the occasional nightmare, in which I somehow restored contact with Dad, my anxiety regarding the matter of the letter subsided. I stopped worrying that he might drive four hours to harass me at school. Instead, my nervous energy focused on the pile of homework which grew exponentially. The chronic stress of fifteen credit hours, the responsibilities of my position as members' advocate of the Society for Earth-Based Religions, and running a blog soon led to yet another depressive episode. I would sit at my desk during class and zone out completely. Fighting my mind's attempts to form a suicide plan distracted me from completing my homework. Some days, I barely made it to class. My enthusiasm for the things I once loved dwindled and I began to feel hopeless, then apathetic. I couldn't bring myself to feel, let alone fight.

On top of all my work-related stress, my mind was also plagued with relationship issues, specifically my crush on Darian. We had already discussed the matter, so I knew they didn't feel the same way about me. Still, I found myself pining after them every hour of the day.

At the start of the semester, I tried to set limits for myself, such as inviting Darian to dinner only once a week, not texting them after 8pm, and avoiding deep discussion topics. I broke all these rules eventually.

This was a time in my life when I was exploring various aspects of my identity and trying to decide how I wanted to live. Part of this included questioning my sexuality, or lack thereof.

I'd like to have a boyfriend... and I kind of understand sexual desire, but even platonic touch such as hugging or a pat on the back makes me uncomfortable. I can't see myself ever letting someone in like that! My friend, Alex, suggested that I might be asexual.

My most thorough research of the term yielded results from YouTubers and Tumblr blogs from people my age. I had hoped for more professional sources, but these were helpful nonetheless. I drafted a short paper of my findings and asked Darian to fact check it. I figured since they were my only close friend in the LGBTQ+ community, they'd know best. Unfortunately, the discussion turned to childhood trauma and I overshared.

A common theory some people use to invalidate asexual people is that something awful must have happened to make them incapable of sexual attraction or even sex-repulsed. This idea frames asexuality as a problem which needs to be fixed. In my paper, I mentioned being sexually assaulted by my uncle. However, I didn't and still don't believe that has any effect on my lack of sexual attraction. I went on to share some other details which I would rather not discuss here.

Darian shifted and squirmed in their chair while they listened. They seemed in such a hurry to leave, they almost left their jacket in my room. I still regret making them that uncomfortable.

Despite dying of embarrassment, I was at least glad to know that I didn't feel any sexual attraction toward Darian—yet. Unfortunately, asexuality does not necessarily mean aromantic. Every day, my romantic attraction toward them grew stronger. Darian was the first person I've ever felt comfortable talking to about sex and some of my other experiences. They listened well and didn't criticize me. I could let my guard down around them.

I fought with myself nonstop. How stupid do I have to be to risk such a great friendship by telling them I love them, even though they've already said they don't feel that way about me! I wish I could let go, but I don't know how. I've never come this far with anyone! I already know how easy it is to lose a friend by saying "I don't like" or "This is hurting me." What kind of heartbreak from Hell can come from telling them, "You're perfect. I can't stop thinking about you. I love you,"? I don't want to hurt Darian and make them feel manipulated into a relationship either. I'm more reluctant to say, "I love you," than "Fuck off."

Insecurity took over. I obsessed over how much I thought I was annoying Darian or if I made them uncomfortable after each conversation. Then, I obsessed over my obsession. This behavior wasn't healthy, but I didn't know how to stop.

One night, I had texted Darian to see if they wanted to get dinner with me. They took a few minutes longer than usual to reply, during which my mood dropped drastically. I lay down on the floor of my dorm room crying because I was certain I'd been annoying them and overstepping their boundaries. I was tempted to self-harm as punishment for my lack of self-control, but Darian replied before I spiraled that far.

Clearly, I needed help. I managed a few floundering efforts with the counselling center, which placed me in group therapy despite my feeble protests. They offered a consultation meeting before I joined the group. I thought this would be a one-on-one meeting. My social anxiety went into overdrive when I saw three counsellors there. For the next hour they dominated the conversation and pressured me to "just try it."

As the semester dragged on, my mind wandered into dangerous territory. While my Spanish professor babbled about one literary text or another, I'd ponder how to tie a noose in a

string of lights. I fell behind on my coursework and spent most of my day in bed. At night, I would wander aimlessly in the quad for hours, despite the steady drop of temperature. If Darian or Maddi couldn't meet me for lunch or dinner, sometimes I wouldn't eat. For the first time in six years, I went 52 and a half hours without eating.

For a project in my honors 199 class, I had to choose at least one of three options for a temporary lifestyle change. I chose two: spending weekends alone and eliminating unnecessary spending. The purpose of these projects was to have quality time alone for rest and reflection, and to be more intentional with my spending habits. Given my depression, this translated to isolating myself and ruminating on Saturdays while refusing to eat anything more than two Lunchables a day. In three weeks, I lost ten pounds.

Group therapy fueled my depression. I feared oversharing again, dominating discussion and invalidating others if I spoke. For an hour a week, I sat completely silent. One of the counsellors said something about wanting to make sure my needs were met. Though I didn't say it, I thought, *I don't even know what it is that I need. I don't even remember why I'm here. Yeah, these skills are good to know, but I wanted help with depression and felt pressured into this group when I really wanted one-on-one help.* My biggest issue with the group at the time was my social anxiety. I knew I needed to work on social skills at some point, but at the time, that wasn't my most pressing issue. Still, I decided I would stay for a few more weeks.

I needed someone to confide in. I went down the list of people who might listen. *Alex knew a portion of my mental agony with self-harm and other things. She couldn't even handle that, and I counted us as close friends. Maddi is beginning to know some of the crazy things I do, and seems really shocked so I don't want to share too much more. Darian knows I suffer*

from social anxiety and depression, but I don't think they quite grasp to what degree. They know I disassociate often and have trouble socially, but that's about it. Darian doesn't even count me as a close friend yet and I don't want to overwhelm them.

I have to be strong as members' advocate. I'm the person SER members go to when they have a crisis, but I don't have anyone who can be personable enough for me to ask for help. I don't feel like I'm a danger to myself enough to justify calling a hotline, and I don't know what they could do to help. I'm also afraid they'll call emergency services and I'll be thrown into a mental institution.

Midnight trips to the quad grew more frequent. Some nights, I tried to cheer myself up by playing bocce ball with walnuts until my hands turned black. Other evenings, I braided wands out of pine needles. Through the light pollution, I tried to locate star clusters like the Pleiades which I'd learned about while watching Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* with Darian. Most nights, I spent a couple hours sitting on a branch of my favorite tree, tracing the carved hearts and initials with my fingers and wondering if I would ever feel better. The first time I tested Darian's reaction to my depression, I brought them here.

We'd been watching *Cosmos* with their friend, Katie. At the end of the episode, I mentioned going for a walk in the quad. "How long will you be out there?" Katie asked.

"God only knows," I said.

"Do you mind if I come with you?" Darian asked. They worried about my late night haunts without my phone or pepper spray.

I wanted to say “no” and explain that the quad is my sacred space. If I invited them out there and something destroyed our friendship in the future, my safe place would be tainted. “Are you sure? It’s getting cold.”

“It’s no problem. I’ll come with you,” they said. We left Katie at the dorm and walked to my favorite tree. Darian stood on a sturdy branch and held the limb above them. For a moment, I imagined them as an adventurer looking up at the stars. I sat on my usual branch, facing the trunk.

I spoke more to the tree than to Darian. I told them I’d been feeling down lately and asked them for advice on how to cope. Darian listed a few things, such as looking up funny videos on YouTube and doing more spontaneous things. Those helped but being able to talk to someone other than my tree was the biggest relief.

Another evening, Darian, Katie and I were watching *Cosmos* again. Five minutes into the episode, my phone rang. It was Jacob, a guy from high school who never could take “no” for an answer. “What the heck? I haven’t talked to him in months,” I said as I rejected the call.

“Should we pause so you can talk?” Darian asked.

“No.” I climbed back into Darian’s bed and sat between them and Katie with the laptop. The episode resumed. Meanwhile, I wondered at the irony of Jacob’s call. Here I was sitting next to my crush who had no romantic interest in me at all. I tried my best to behave.

Usually, I hate physical contact. I spent the rest of the episode trying to maintain a couple centimeters of space between me and Katie. While I squirmed to avoid touching her feet, I leaned in too close to Darian. The hair on their arm brushed mine. Suddenly, my whole body

felt warm and heavy. I wanted nothing more than for Katie to leave so I could cuddle with Darian.

Oh shit! I sat upright before leaning in too far. In hindsight, I think I just experienced strong sensual attraction, but not sexual attraction. I panicked. For the rest of the night, I crossed my legs and pulled my shoulders close to my ears. The resulting panic attack was so bad, I paid no attention to the episode and had to leave immediately afterward.

I left group therapy for individual counselling. Despite my anxiety related to speaking in the group, silence was more stressful. On one of my last days in the group, there were only a few members present. I had to share. I told them group wasn't working for me, that I was too anxious of taking time away from the group, and there had been disastrous consequences for me sharing my problems in the past which made me uncomfortable now. I wasn't getting the help I needed and I was suicidal. The group leaders thanked me for sharing and pulled me aside afterward to check on me.

The obsession with Darian continued. I bought a miniature handmade journal and wrote on each page something I loved about Darian, such as the way they'd get so excited about *Cosmos* I'd be excited about science too or the way they'd spazz out and fling their head back when they were excited about something. Along with this, I planned to give them a small elephant figurine (their favorite animal) and a piece of malachite.

I invited them out to dinner after finishing the little book. While Darian looked for food, I contemplated whether or not it was a good idea to give them the journal. I worried about overstepping their boundaries, so I only gave them the elephant and malachite.

Thanksgiving Break approached, and my mental health was deteriorating rapidly. I didn't know if I would have the mental strength to survive the holiday at home where there were more triggers and means for self-harm. Although I worried about oversharing with Darian, they were the only friend I trusted might be able to help. I knew their mother was a psychiatrist and Darian dealt with mental health issues as well, so they must understand, at least a little bit. Before confiding completely in them, I mentioned my depression casually, as though it were merely a temporary case of the blues, in order to gauge their reaction.

A week before break, I invited Darian to lunch. I don't cry often, but when I do the floodgates open and there's no stopping the flow of tears. Knowing this, I wrote a two-page, single-spaced paper for them to read in case my emotions became too intense to control. I managed to choke back my tears, but anxiety impeded my speech. While Darian read, I sat staring out the window and wringing my hands under the table. "Suicide is damn near impossible to talk about. I've had issues with depression since I was nine or ten. I didn't know what to call it until 7th grade when we learned (vaguely) about it in health class. I tried to get help and wound up making things worse..." I went on to recount the time I tried to open up to my mother about my depression.

Right now feels like I'm about to relive that nightmare ten times over.

My mind has been busy thinking of ways to turn everyday objects into weapons to be used against myself. Already I've had to give [J] my razors, tweezers, and Christmas lights (which, ironically, I brought because they used to help me cope). I've managed to create a safety plan for while I'm on campus, but not while I'm at home.

While Darian read, my mind darted through the contents of the letter. I recalled what it felt like to be the Grinch who ruined Christmas. Now that I had cut Dad out of my life, I worried *What if I ruin Thanksgiving too?* I remembered praying for death after the Christmas incident, but I feared Hell too much to try dying myself. Now I was pagan. I didn't have the threat of eternal torture to stop me from attempting suicide if Dad guilt-tripped me again.

There are too many means for self-harm at home. That's the major reason I don't want to go back. I can't talk to my family about mental illness, let alone suicide. A few years back, I confided in a close grandmother about some of the suicidal thoughts I'd been having. Her response was, "That's so selfish! I can't believe you would think of doing such a thing!" This summer, my mom's childhood friend attempted suicide. Mom's words were, "I don't understand how things could ever get so bad you just decide to quit." The two haven't been as close in recent years and now Mom wants even less to do with her friend.

After the day Dad threw me against the stove, Mom and Grandma Madden tried to convince me to testify against him. Surely, with the aid of my siblings' testimony, Judge Aylsworth would have to revoke Dad's visitation rights. However, Dad's unpredictable behavior terrified me. I feared he might lash out at me or threaten suicide.

The thought of facing my father's violent temper or handling the guilt of potentially causing his death overwhelmed me. Dad has always had a way of manipulating my conscience to suit him and I couldn't live with myself if I hurt him. Though the commandment "Honor thy

father and mother” no longer applied to me as a pagan, I still believed in loyalty to family, no matter the case.

I explained all this to Grandma when she asked why I wouldn’t take the issue to court. Instead of offering comfort and assurance that Dad was responsible for his own actions, she took the opportunity to tell me how selfish I was for contemplating suicide. My heart sank into my empty stomach. I had tried so hard to avoid hurting the person who abused me. *Why can't I do anything right?*

I’m trying like hell to hold it together, but I don’t trust myself anymore...

My depression is worse when I’m at home and during the holidays. Not to mention, I’ll probably spend part of break huddled in my room listening to the motor of every car that drives by so I can hide from my Dad if he pulls up.

I’m afraid to tell you all this. I don’t want to bum you out, ruin your holiday, or otherwise be a burden. I just need someone to be calm and rational when I can’t. Can you please help me stay safe this Thanksgiving Break?

I really appreciate you reading this far. Thank you.

I worried about being selfish for asking Darian to take time away from their family to help me through my personal issues. Another part of me wondered if I was only sharing my problems to elicit pity from them. Usually, I wouldn’t even tell my close friends this sort of thing. I couldn’t help but think *Am I only telling them this because I like them? Would I tell my other friends this if they wouldn’t freak out? Am I overstepping any boundaries?*

I was also terrified of overwhelming them with my drama and watching them leave, or worse, waste their energy trying to help and be dragged down with me. Reaching out for help had ended in disaster too many times before. Telling Grandma Madden about being molested by AJ ultimately ended with my parents' divorce and the total upset of our lives. My family and I had gone hungry and without electricity for months because I mentioned my depression to Mom. *Maybe it would be better for everyone if I didn't open my mouth*, I thought even though I knew it was too late now.

"Thank you for telling me," Darian said as they looked up from the page. "First of all, you're not selfish and I can definitely see how it can get that bad." We went on to discuss a possible safety plan for break, including quality time and code words in case of an emergency. Afterward, they bought me a pint of cookies and cream ice cream before they had to go to work.

Thanksgiving was hectic. I woke up at 2:30am and paced around my room for a couple hours before going back to bed. Dad texted at 5, "Happy Thanksgiving," to which I never replied. I went back to bed until 9. The next four hours were spent cleaning, cooking, and bickering with my mom and little sister. Hallie flung a spoonful of potatoes at Mom while we were cooking. Mom wacked her playfully with a wooden spoon.

Everyone arrived at 1. My aunt's husband was sick and stayed home, so I, the pagan, was elected to bless the meal. Over dinner, I wound up explaining to my cousins what it means to be nonbinary and asexual. Somehow that lead to a discussion between two of my cousins, where one accused the other of pretending to be a lesbian. Never mind that she had been thrown out of her home for her deviance from heteronormativity.

The guests finally left around 3:30. I napped until 4:30 and woke to the sound of Dad honking as he drove by in his little red Ford Ranger. I watched *The Lego Batman Movie* with my family and went to bed early. All in all, it was a normal Thanksgiving for us. The worst was yet to come.

I woke up the first time at 1:30am, about the time when Grandma Madden heard on the scanner that someone had attempted suicide at a Circle S in Chandler. I didn't know yet and went back to sleep until 4:30, 7:30, and 9:00, shortly after Dad stopped by with the news about my little brother, Matt.

Here's what I pieced together: Around 1:30am on November 24th, Matt called Dad to tell him where he would be. Supposedly, Matt called Dad instead of Mom because Matt and Mom "weren't seeing eye to eye." Dad called the police, who found Matt unconscious from an overdose. They rushed him to Gateway and later to Cross Pointe. Matt would be fine, but until he saw a doctor, he couldn't have any visitors. Even then, it was up to Matt who he would talk to and when.

Dad and my step-mom, Martha, invited Hallie to go with them to visit Matt in the hospital. I considered asking to go too. For my brother, I would put up with more of Dad's crap. However, the tension between me and Dad seemed like the last thing Matt needed, so I stayed home. Hallie declined, but for different reasons.

My family seemed to ignore the situation and go about their lives shopping and movie-going. I spent the day in contact with Darian and attempting to hide any emotion from my family. I didn't feel comfortable admitting to them what had been happening in my own mind. Darian supported me while I did my best to support my brother's recovery. At 2:00, I managed

to contact my brother at the hospital. My conscience doubled the punishment for being so consumed with my own problems I hadn't noticed my brother's suffering.

The day before the break ended, Mom, Kelly and I stopped at Walmart. While they grocery shopped, I thumbed through the "thank you" cards. When it came time to check out, I tried to hide the card from my parents by using the self-checkout line and laying the card face down under its envelope as I scanned it.

"Caitlin Renee, what are you up to?" Mom teased.

"Nothing," I replied.

"Are you lying to me?" she asked playfully.

"Yes," I said.

"What are you up to, child?"

"Nothing."

"Kid," she fussed at me.

"Mother," I sassied back.

"Are you going to embarrass yourself?" she asked.

"Probably," I replied. I couldn't help but think what a dark comedy this was, to convince my mother I was buying a love note instead of a "thank you for helping me not die this week" card.

That night was the first time I'd self-harmed in years. I tried reaching out to Darian, but by that time, they were already asleep. We texted back and forth during the drive back to Muncie the next morning.

How are you feeling now?

I'm not as bad now. Just a little scratched up.

What happened?

I got to feeling really anxious and isolated after talking to Matt and spiraled to the point of self-harm.

I gazed out the window at the passing corn fields. Mom and Kelly discussed the upcoming comic conventions while munching on their road snacks. My phone binged again.

How is Matt?

He's frustrated with Cross Pointe and their security measures and their pushing rehab. He's looking forward to going home.

He's also mad that Dad told Mom. He didn't want to talk to her for a lot of the same reasons I don't.

Makes sense. Matt is dealing with a lot right now. Does he know what he's going to be doing to get better?

He's refusing therapy because he doesn't want to relive everything. His idea of recovery is to go back to work, take care of Jasper, & like almost everyone in this family, act like this never happened.

“Who are you yacking at back there?” Mom asked.

“Darian. We’re trying to set up a time to hang out and maybe start the Neil de Grasse Tyson *Cosmos*,” I lied.

“That’d be fun. So, when’s Darius Rucker gonna be back up at school?”

“I think they’re coming up later tonight.” My phone binged again.

Unfortunately, that’s not how he’s going to
recover.

How are you feeling about it?

I’m glad Matt’s ok and has some fight left. As far as family goes, I’m upset that Dad and my step-mom were the only ones to visit and that everyone else just goes on shopping, to the movies, etc. I’m even more mad at myself for going along with the act. It also feels like my family is falling apart and I can’t do anything.

There wasn’t a lot you could’ve done,
Caitlyn. Besides, you made the effort to listen to him and reach out to him. That was more helpful than anything.
:(I’m sorry. That’s terrible.

I hate being fake.

But you might not have been in the place to

confront your family about this.

I hate being fake too but we put on masks

with family. It's just easier to avoid the fight

sometimes.

I felt like a hypocrite. Here I was complaining about having to act fine, yet I continued the charade. Then again, what could I do? Tell Mom that another of her kids was suicidal? That I couldn't talk to her because she got angry every time I had a panic attack or accused me of being "overdramatic" or "too sensitive" whenever I was upset? There were three hours left of our trip and I wasn't about to argue the rest of the way. Darian provided enough distraction so I wouldn't have to speak to my parents as much.

How do you feel in general? How bad are the scratches?

I may call the counselling center to move up my appt. The scratches aren't too bad. I didn't break skin & my shirt sleeve covers them. I could've done worse.

That's good. I'm glad it wasn't any worse.

We can try to hang out earlier in the week too.

I'd like that.

Even though Darian assured me I could reach out to them at any time, my depression spiraled further at school. During one difficult episode, I tried drawing on my legs with a red ink pen instead of cutting myself. It was the early hours of the morning and I refused to wake Darian. I drew long, red lines on my thighs, but the mental images of scratches and gashes which that evoked made things worse. I jabbed myself in the thighs repeatedly with the pen.

I was relieved to have passed all my classes that semester, but I was still anxious about returning home for the winter holidays. Though I still had Darian's support, the events of Thanksgiving Break did not promise a merry Christmas or happy new year. A three-week break meant things could become three times worse, especially since the odds of running into Dad increased three-fold.

During the first week of break, I burned the little journal I wrote for Darian. The longer I kept it, the greater my temptation was to hand it to them. I couldn't risk ruining our friendship because I couldn't take a "no." I dowsed the book in perfume and fed the flames with loose notes from my classes. When the fire went out, for good measure, I stabbed the book with the stick I used to stir the fire. It crumbled into leaves of ash. No one would ever find a page. It hurt, but I knew I had to let go.

The last week of Christmas break, I was out with my grandmother running errands. We had stopped at the Check 'n Go just as Dad was leaving the building. Grandma knew I had cut off contact with him. She sometimes tried to convince me to talk to him, on the grounds that he

was my father and it was the holidays. Instead of turning around and coming back later, she parked the car, greeted my Dad, and went to complete her errand.

I hurried to lock the doors and fumbled with my phone. No sooner had I pulled up Darian's contact info, than Dad knocked on the glass. In the moment, civility seemed the safest route. It's harder for situations to escalate if you're polite. So, I rolled down the window to talk to him. "You want to come sit in the truck where it's warm?" he asked. Despite my better judgement, I let myself be lured into the front seat of his little red Ranger.

"Martha and I have missed you."

I looked down at my hands wringing in my lap, then straight ahead at the car parked in front of us.

"How are things up at school?"

"Fine," I said.

"Are you going to talk to me?"

I shrugged and slipped back into my old habit. "I'm sorry..."

"It's okay. Everyone has bad days."

I wanted to stop and tell him that letter was the result of twenty years of pent up frustration; that I still stood by everything in the letter and had left countless other transgressions out. However, I was aware that I was now in his truck and the odds of setting off his temper were greater than losing a game of Russian Roulette. Silence seemed safest.

"Hey, you wanna talk to Martha?"

"Sure."

He dialed the number for my step-mom, turned on speaker phone, and set his cellphone between us on the bench seat.

"Hello," Martha answered.

"Hey, Martha, guess who I ran into." He turned to me, "Say hi, Caitlin."

"Hey, Martha."

"Hey, Catie, how you doin'?"

"Good, you?"

"Good...good. We've missed you. Do you wanna come over sometime and visit?"

"Sure." *Why am I like this?*

Finally, Dad let me go inside with Grandma. I kicked myself for agreeing to dinner with Dad and Martha. If I couldn't say "no," this no-contact policy would never work.

I resolved to talk to Dad over dinner about the contents of the letter. Still, I didn't have the courage. He continued on racist and homophobic rants during my visit and I didn't challenge him. As much as I hated being sneaky and deceitful, it was time for plan B.

I took my bag with me to the bathroom on the false pretense that I needed to change my menstrual pad. Inside my purse were the Bible, sheath, and belt buckle, which Mom had completely forgotten to dispose of while I was at school. I stuffed them in the bottom drawer of the vanity and covered them with a couple wash cloths for Dad to find later.

Unfortunately, he found them sooner than expected. Luckily though, I was back at Mom's when he called me. "Caitlin, you wanna talk to me about this stuff I just found in my bathroom drawer?"

"I don't want it anymore."

"I'm on my way over. Would you please talk to me about this?"

"Fine."

Dad parked in the alley way next to Mom's house. I opened the passenger door to Dad's truck and moved the sheath, Bible and belt buckle from the seat to my lap. Dad shut the dome light off and turned down the radio. I remained silent. It's easier to avoid being hit when you're quiet. "Talk to me."

I paused a moment to choose my words carefully. "It really bothers me that you assumed the letter I sent was just the result of a bad day. It feels like you missed the point entirely."

"I don't know what your point is."

I sighed and continued. "I don't like the way you treat people, or how you refuse to take responsibility for your actions." The light in my little sister's upstairs bedroom flicked on. Dad remained silent. "I haven't said anything about it in the past because I've been afraid of being hit."

"By who?"

"You."

"I never once hit you."

My voice came out cold and crisp. "You don't remember the time you were tickling me and I told you to stop but you wouldn't and I accidentally grabbed your hand with the bad finger and you threw me across the kitchen?"

Dad shook his head. "I never laid a hand on you."

Disgusted, I continued. "Do you remember Lady, Aunt Sandy's dog, and the time you held a knife against her throat?"

"You know I was never gonna hurt that damn mutt."

"I know you've bragged about beating the crap out of Andrew and Jon." My voice remained quiet but firm.

"Those boys changed."

I wanted to abandon my composure and scream, "And I haven't? I'm a liberal, asexual, eclectic pagan and I'm going to school 380 miles away just to get some distance from you! Now, I can't speak for Andrew, but you beat Hailey because she came out as gay and trans." Instead, I sighed again and paused longer than intended.

"What do you want from me?"

"I don't know, maybe an apology, like 'I'm sorry I did that.'"

Dad muttered something resembling one, but I didn't listen. I shouldn't have had to fight to be acknowledged. Dad turned to me and leaned in for a hug.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not comfortable with that."

"I'm your dad and I love—"

"I know, and I'm sorry, but I'm just not comfortable with that." The truth is, I was sick of him thinking a hug would make everything better.

"Call me when you get up to school safe."

"I can do that much." I opened the passenger door and stepped out. *I'll send the "Made it" text, then reinstate my no-contact policy.* Maintaining my poise, I closed the door to the cab and walked to the front door, dodging piles of dog poop in the yard. Once inside, I dumped the buckle, sheath, and Bible into the kitchen garbage and went to my room. It was finally over.